PAINTINGS

of

Ishwar Dass

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12
COLOUR
PLATES
BY ONE
OF INDIA'S
GREATEST
ARTISTS

Paintings of

ISHWAR DASS

INTRODUCTION BY MANU THACKER

759.954

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My Approach

Devotion to Art to me is something subjective and, as such, it declaims a purpose apart from that which seeks to draw me out. I have been moved by my own emotions and by those of my surroundings; I have, I admit, reacted to situations which I have sought to paint. I am essentially, in consequence, a romantic painter. In a way, the immediate has not sealed me entirely to the present and I have looked back many a time with reverence and wonder.

In effect, what I have portrayed with line and colour has little philosophy in the prevalent sense. Mostly I have followed my own dictates in my approach to subjects and have produced works which would strike many as angular. But my angularity has not been incomprehensible and I am not an obscurantist. I do not create any problems for reflection but I have been inspired by the rich moments which form our emotional heritage. I have sought to convey them through my paintings. I feel that there are split moments in which lifetimes are lived. There have been such, and I have attempted to catch those fleeting shadows—shadows that might once have been real and corporate, cast on us across the centuries.

My method is simple. Things occur to my mind. Emotions sway them. They crowd and shape together. Mass melts into form and I take my brush and set to my canvas. My vision is varied, my emotions diverse. The plates following will tell the rest.

Ishwar Dass

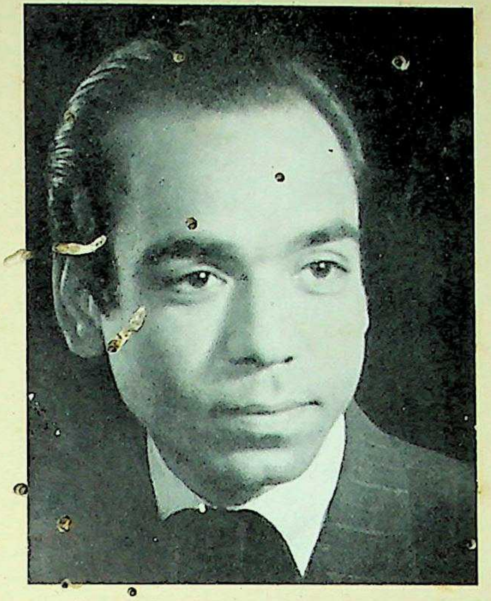
State Museum, Library

Art was more than a passion with Manu Thacker; it was Life. It brought us close together, as close as two human souls can be. In life he was a solace to me, a guide and an inspiration; in his eternal repose now he is an ineffaceable memory, sweet and tender as a rose.

He was closely associated with the production of this album from its very first stage; and was in the midst of it when he was snatched away by the Gods. It will remain a life-long regret to me that he could not see it completed—this venture which was really his.

Ishwar Dass

1939
16.9.64
State Museum, Library



Ishwar Dass

The renaissance in Indian Painting, which saw the light of day in Bengal in the early years of this century and which was sponsored by such eminent men as the Tagores, Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Lord Ronaldshay, Rothenstein and others, has had a chequered history. It showed such rich promise and produced such fine results in the early stages that one had hoped and expected great things from it.

In fact, the first batch of artists who led the renaissance under the inspiring guidance of Abanindranath Tagore were hailed as great masters by competent critics the world over and their works won immediate recognition and appreciation wherever they were shown—and they were shown in the early years in all the important cities of the world. Most of the artists of this first batch later became the heads of the Government art schools in the country which were till then run by the Britishers after the model of the Kensington School of London. Shree Nandalal Bose in Bengal, the late Sharda Ukil in Delhi, Asit Haldar in U.P., D. P. Roy Choudhury in Madras, Syed Ahmad in Hyderabad (Dn.), K. Venkatappa in Mysore, Jagannath Ahivasi and Ravishankar Raval in Western India, have helped much to lay the foundations of the Indian art movement.

It is not my idea to refer here to all the names of those early pioneers and their achievements as they have been ably dealt with by my friend, G. Venkatachalam, in his *Contemporary Indian Painters*.

" This renaissance," writes Mr. Venkatachalam, " hardly half a century old, has had its ups and downs, its achievements and failures, but nevertheless has arrested the attention of the art world by its freshness, originality and sincerity. Artists and critics, who denounced it at first have since become its admirers and votaries. Some of the students who studied under Abanindranath Tagore have become world famous, each one of them developing a striking individuality of his own. Their art represents, in its strength and weakness, in its truthfulness and quaintness, the spiritual and æsthetic nature of India's creative genius, and therefore, they are the true pioneers of Modern Indian Painting."

The second generation of painters of this renaissance, with rare exceptions, failed to reach the standards of their teachers and there had already begun to appear visible signs of decadence and degeneracy in their ideals and works. Most of them became mere copyists and imitators and some caricaturists. There was a general set-back in the movement, and when some of the promising ones took to "Modernism," the future looked dark and gloomy.

The present plight of a large number of painters among the younger generation is pathetic indeed. They are puzzled and confused, and finding themselves at cross-roads, they do not know which way to choose. Like the baffled *Trisanku,* they swing between heaven and earth ; torn between two conflicting ideas they act like Hamlet. Between the pull of tradition and the lure of "Modernism," they behave like a lady in a fashion shop. The "Modern Art" movement has also created a few converts in this country like Ramkinkar Baij of Shantiniketan, who without any mental reservation is out-Picassoing Picasso and out-Mooring Henry Moore. The worst of this is that this hybrid type of work is labelled as Indian art by those who have not even grasped the *Sadanga,* the six essential limbs of Indian painting.

At the same time it must be admitted that several independent styles have developed without any significant bearing to the styles followed by the early pioneers of the Renaissance Movement. These signs are neither unhealthy nor disruptive, but hold out a distinct promise of a future achievement. And to this have contributed, the late Amrita Shergil, Shiavax Chawda, K. K. Hebber, Babash Sanyal and a host of others. Artists like Manishi Dey, N. S. Bendre, Vinayak Mosoji, Binod Mukerji, Vajubhai Bhagat, Rabindra Dutta have contributed a rich variety in the field of Indian art by the genius of their versatility. There are some who have drawn inspiration from old Jain manuscripts and paintings, like Babuji Herur and Kumar Mangalsinghji of Latthi. There are others who have taken to Indian folk art in which the lead has been given by Jamini Roy.

Following the Renaissance Movement, we have still a fortunate few who can yet revitalise that peculiar phase of Indian painting started a generation back. Ishwar Dass, the subject of study here, is one of those. He is a gifted artist, whose works vibrate with Indian feeling and atmosphere. He is a traditionalist both in his outlook and expression, and as he himself says: "I am a humble follower of the Indian school propagated by Dr. Abanindranath Tagore. I started to learn painting at the age of seven under Mr. P. R. Roy, another follower of the same school, and later on graduated from the School of Arts, Lucknow." Ishwar Dass is one of the best type of Indian painters thrown up by the 20th century renaissance in Indian painting and as such is well worth a serious study.

A native of the United Provinces, Ishwar Dass was born and brought up at Lucknow. He comes of the well known family of Shahs of the days of the Nawabs of Oudh. Environment is a big factor in life, especially in an artist's life; and how much the Muslim atmosphere and art of Lucknow influenced the child mind of Ishwar Dass could easily be seen from his paintings. Next, perhaps, to Delhi and Bijapur, Lucknow has the largest medieval monuments with their histories and associations that were bound to influence the sensitive nature of the growing child, especially when it was born with certain tendencies for creative expression as Ishwar Dass had.

His father, Shah Shree Krishna Dass, a connoisseur of art and a man of taste and understanding, was another big influence in his life. The fine collection of Rajput and Mughul paintings which was in his father's possession and which he, as a child, loved to admire, had made a deep impression on his young mind, and eventually turned out to be another big factor in influencing his art. All these influences are there to be seen in his works, and hence a Mughul tone in all Ishwar Dass's paintings. He breathed a Muslim atmosphere and was brought up amidst *Mughalai* surroundings as all well born Hindus in that city, and it was no wonder that young Ishwar showed a natural inclination towards Mughul art and tried to shape his own after that. It was not slavishly copying the miniature art of the Mughuls but imbibing the spirit of that culture and giving expression to it in his own way.

" I have drawn inspiration," writes the artist, " from the history of our past, ancient and medieval, but the one aspect that has appealed to me most is the mode and manner of Mughul life, as will be evident when you see my paintings." It is obvious this love for medieval pageantry is to be seen in almost all his works. In fact, more than half the paintings reproduced here have this Mughul touch about them.

It is interesting to note here how truly cosmopolitan an Indian becomes when he is a great artist and how liberal he is in his outlook and attitude. The Muslim painter, Abdur Rahman Chughtai, chose to fancy the love-pranks of Radha and Krishna in a hundred and one ways, while a Hindu painter like Ishwar Dass lost himself in Muslim culture and tried to interpret it through his works.

The first right lead in this direction was given by no less a person than the Father of this Renaissance, Abanindranath Tagore, whose life and art were also greatly influenced by the Mughul culture. Some of the greatest masterpieces were studies of the Mughul Emperors like Shah Jehan taking a last glance of the Taj Mahal from the Jasmine tower with his daughter by his side and the long panel study of Aurangzebe in a standing posture, once in the collection of P. R. Das of Patna and now at Shantiniketan.

Ishwar Dass was a precocious child, and a discerning father seeing his son's innate gifts for drawing and colouring, encouraged him to take to painting seriously and as a career. He got the services of an accomplished artist, P. R. Roy, to teach him first, and later when young Ishwar had attained some proficiency, got him sent to the Lucknow Government School of Art for training under Asit Kumar Haldar, the Principal.

Mr. Haldar recalls to his mind his first impressions of the young pupil when he went to join the art school and writes thus : “ I still remember the bright eyes of young Ishwar Dass radiating with enthusiasm when he first came to see me in 1934 to learn painting. His great admiration for art and the desire to take off from it its enchanting veils appeared to me very real that day.”

Asit Haldar was the first artist of the renaissance to be appointed as the head of the Government School of Art, and he proved not only an ideal teacher, like his *guru* Abanindranath Tagore, but a successful administrator. It was just luck that Ishwar had such a good teacher who helped to bring out his hidden genius in the right way, without crushing the spirit or distorting his vision as most art masters do.

Like most young Indian artists, his ambition was to go to the United Kingdom, join the Slade School or the Royal College of Arts, study the western technique, exhibit his works and win appreciation from critics ; and towards this end he made an abortive attempt in 1939. He even came to Bombay set on his western journey, but the news of the outbreak of the Second World War made him abandon the trip at the last moment. Years later, he told the writer: “If I had gone to London at that time, I would not have become a devotee to Indian art ”.

It eventually turned out to be that it was as well that he did not go to the West to learn art, for this craze to go West is natural, desirable and even understandable, but it seldom strikes our young artists that it would be premature to desire a dip in the western sea of culture before sufficiently mastering our own heritage of Indian art. If the idea is to find a wider object of study it is better to master first the allied eastern arts of Japan, China and Java, which have closer affinity with Indian art and hence are easy of assimilation; for how can one, who is devoid of his own culture, appreciate, much less assimilate, any other foreign culture ?

Ishwar Dass paints in water colour and shows mastery in the wash methods introduced by the Japanese painters, who were invited by Abanindranath Tagore to teach his pupils This “ wet-wash ” method has somehow taken the fancy of the Indian painters as it suited the subtle nature of their feelings, and it must be admitted that they have made a good job of it. Ishwar Dass excels in this technique and shows a marked proficiency in its handling. His method is both interesting and striking. At first he executes the drawing in pencil, then he fills in all the colours with immaculate details, then he starts giving washes by wetting the paper and it is at this stage he has to exercise his discretion in choice of colours and the number of washes that he must give to bring about a harmonious atmosphere. When all the colours get merged into each other, then once again he gives his final touches to bring out the chief features of his subject. In this technique, I have observed, the artist knows where to stop. Such type of work is lost if under-finished or over-done : it should not also be loaded with intricate designs or have any loud colours ; in brief, it should be able to say more by leaving out than by emphasising. It should be more suggestive than representative. Those who are trained in the Western methods might find that in this type of painting both perspective and light and shade have different meanings altogether. This technique has played an important part in the renaissance of Indian painting. The aim of such art is always to create a world in which the imagination of the common man is elevated to contemplation of noble and beautiful ideas. Artists like Chughtai, Indra Dugar, Kshitin Muzumdar, Pulinbihari Dutt, Somalal Shah, Durgashankar Bhattacharya and Ishwar Dass, to mention a few, have mastered this particular method of handling water colours and have produced admirable results. Though not a prolific painter like Chughtai and others, Ishwar Dass has to his credit quite a number of paintings, some of which are in the art galleries in various parts of India and some in private collections.

As noticed earlier, his favourite theme has been to recapture the splendour and the spirit of the Mughul period in Indian history and in that he has succeeded to a remarkable degree. Two things helped considerably in this: first, the medieval atmosphere of the Muslim city of Lucknow, in which he was brought up from childhood ; and the second, his father's rich collection of Mughul and Rajput paintings, which had captivated his imagination at a very early age. He provides a vivid glimpse of the Mughul era not from its highways but from its byeways, not from the pompous court scenes and historic battlefields but through the quiet domestic and colourful social life and interesting vignettes of the period. He does occasionally paint such simple homely scenes of Hindu life as his " The Disunited Cords " or "The Toilet" and even symbolic subjects like "The Night" and "Ragini Bhairavin," reproduced in this album. He has also to his credit a beautiful series of "Bhakta Surdas," which won for him high laurels. But his best are always those depicting the Mughul life and scenes, as for instance, his " Models for the Taj " and " The Evening Call," reproduced in this album.

His work " The Toilet " (Plate VIII) is a delightful little composition in one of his best wash methods depicting the simple scene of a young lady seated on an Indian chair and doing her hair before a low mirror. He has omitted all the unnecessary details, and with an imagination as fresh and spontaneous as that of a nature-poet, he has caught the essential charm of her pose and the naturalness of the theme. The soft shaded colour scheme is as appealing as the youthful figure of the maid, and the thoughtful expression on the face is suggestive of the purpose of her toilet.

Equally fascinating but much more sensuous in appeal and character are the three other companion pictures " The Bloom " (Plate X), " He Cometh Not " (Plate VII) and " Keeping the Tryst " (Plate XI) ; and they are in the best style of Ishwar Dass and typical of his genius. In the languorous poses, seductive look and love-laden eyes, you recognise not high-born princesses or ladies of noble birth but women of the harem or the courtesan or the gypsy in their passionate moods. There is nothing vulgar or cheap ; if anything, they are intensely human.

Note the love-lorn expression in the eyes of the delicately poised maid of sweet sixteen (Plate X) with a stringed instrument in her hands, waiting for her lover against a sublime background of a white marble pavilion and a delicate pink blossoming tree, with two pigeons cooing their love to one another as if to tease their mistress on her lonely vigil. It is an exquisitely painted picture, almost as unreal as youthful dreams.

In " He Cometh Not " (Plate VII), the mood is more intense and the passion on the face of the waiting maiden is like a flame, all afire and consuming. The gypsy, in " Keeping the Tryst " (Plate XI), is a wayside vamp whose love-spell on the hearts of the weak wayfarers is as deadly as the blue poison of the King Cobra. There is no escape from it. It is natural that Ishwar Dass should paint such seductive types of women as he is both young and imaginative. He is certainly no ascetic, this artist.

" Ragini Malvi " (Plate VI) and " Ragini Bhairvin " (Plate V) are two visual representations of the melody moulds in Indian music as conceived by Ishwar Dass. Of course, they have nothing in common, either in symbolism or in treatment, with the *Raga-Ragini* series painted by the Rajput masters of the 17th and 18th centuries. While " Ragini Malvi " is loud and lithographic, the " Ragini Bhairvin " is more subtle and ethereal.

" The Night " (Plate II), in the form of a lovely woman holding a crescent moon in one hand and a bright star in the other, sweeping across a star-studded sky, like a mass of rolling clouds in darker shades of purple and blue, is as mystical as it is beautiful, and would be an apt illustration for a poem of Shelley or Blake. The habit of symbolising forms of nature in human shape is not uncommon in Indian art.

" The Flame " (Plate III), is a lovely little lyric in colour and as delicately beautiful as a Ming vase or a poem of Keats. The tearful face, the lonely lamp, the mellow atmosphere of the deepening night, relieved by the glow of the faint flame of an oil lamp, suggest significantly the pangs of a patiently waiting bride for her first nuptial night.

In quite a different vein and conveying an altogether different atmosphere is " The Evening Call " (Plate IX), in which a blind beggar listens intently to the Muezzin call at the sunset hour, forgetting his misery looking towards the golden glow against which a mosque with its dome and minarets are silhouetted. The beggar's upturned face, lit by an inner light, seems to say : " Hope reigns eternal in the human breast " ; while the face of his boy companion gazing sympathetically at the beggar seems suggest : " No true prayer goes in vain ".

A musician lost in a reverie at the buzzing sound of a bee sucking honey from a tender flower is the theme of his " Musical Symphony " (Plate IV), a poetical piece of great charm and fine feeling. " Disunited Cords " (Plate XII), is a languid expression of clashing feelings, one with a throbbing heart, waiting impatiently, the other deeply absorbed and quite oblivious of the passing night, brought together by the sanctity of wedlock. It is a symbolic representation of the inside truth of the poet's home, all the world over, who misses his own in his untiring efforts to cheer up the rest.

Lovely as are these delicate studies of the maiden's moods, now sad, now gay and now voluptuous and lyrical in their appeal, it is when presenting picturesque glimpses of the pageantry of the Mughul scenes that Ishwar Dass is at his best.

Mr. O. C. Gangoly, the well-known critic, has this fitting observation on Ishwar Dass's art : " To Mr. Ishwar Dass, one of the brilliant members of the Lucknow group, the theme and technique of the old Mughul School of Painting made a special appeal and he turned his face against the old Indian Sagas, which still fascinated his colleagues, and he sought inspiration in the rich pageantry of the history of the grand Mughuls. But unlike the contemporary painters of the Mughul courts, Mr. Dass has avoided the court scenes and gorgeous formalities and has chosen to depict the daily life of the princes and potentates of the time,—and has attempted to give us glimpses of many of the interesting anecdotes and domestic happenings of their lives.

" Typical examples of his visualizations are ' Emperor Jehangir's visit to the Royal Studios ' and ' Shah Jehan's choice of the Models for the Taj ' (Plate I). In the first picture we have a glimpse of the practice of a great emperor and a great connoisseur of pictures paying weekly visits to inspect and criticise the works of his court painters. The cares and the heavy duties of the State did not prevent his taking a personal interest in the progress of his artists, who were frequently loaded with praises and presents mingled with severe criticisms of their demerits and weaknesses. By this means of close inspection and reviews of the artists' works, he developed the Mughul School of Painting to a very high level of achievement. In the second picture, we find the various competitors submitting their models for the Taj for the scrutiny and appraisement of Shah Jehan. Here, the architectural setting as well as the grouping of figures lend a vividness and actuality to the visualization of the scene."

The other critic, G. Venkatachalam, who is also an admirer of Ishwar Dass and who has seen most of his works, observes thus on the art of Ishwar Dass : " It is a pity these reproductions do no justice to the artist. Though we miss much of the flavour which we associate with Ishwar Dass's paintings, we get some idea of the style of his art and what type of painter he is. I know how difficult it is to reproduce in India the delicate drawings and the exquisite colouring of Indian artists, who paint in the ' wet-wash ' style. Only wood-cut methods would do a little justice to them as could be seen from the old prints done in Japan of Nandalal Bose's 'Sati' and 'Kaikeyi' and A. N. Tagore's 'The Buddha as a Mendicant.'

"Ishwar Dass has rightly struck to the traditional style and methods of painting, and he knows why. As he himself says: 'The principal aim of the artist is to express his emotions through form and colour, just as a poet does through words and a musician through tunes.'

"He did not, like some unthinking artists, hanker after new fashions in art and new modes of expression. He realised, as all intelligent artists should do, that it is far better to be true to one's own *dharma* than to ape others' manner and styles. He has tried to be true to his inner experiences and hence the sincerity and straightforward character of his art. All art is a specialisation, and he deliberately chose to 'specialise' in the way he has done, with the result that he has few rivals among his contemporaries and hardly any superiors. He is the rightful heir to the traditions and ideals of his country's art and, as such, he is of the noble band of pioneers who carry on the great and grand work started by Tagore and Havell."

Evaluating the art and trying to be as impartial it is possible for a teacher to be, his *guru,* Asit Haldar, writes about him thus: "Ishwar Dass does not suffer from any 'ism-complex' that vests the minds of many an Indian artist deriving inspiration by reading literary criticisms of the Western school of painters. On the contrary, he goes deep as an artist to his innermost aesthetic experience and thus cultivates cultural refinement through sheer zeal (*sadhana*) without being confused or burdened by the incubus of foreign influence. More and more, Ishwar Dass will no doubt bring his own life's experience and the imagination of his race to his art, which, I think, is the true path for the artist in India.".

No finer tributes or no saner advice could a pupil expect from his *guru.* In some ways he has fulfilled the wishes of his teacher. Today, Ishwar Dass is not only a great painter but a moving spirit in the art world of his province. He is one of the founders of the U.P. Artists' Association and a member of the All-India Association of Fine Arts. He has taken important part in the deliberations of All-India Art Conferences, held in Delhi and Bombay. Since the last seven years, he has received continuous encouragement and support from Shree Kailashpat Singhania, the well-known industrialist and connoisseur of art. He has won prizes at a number of exhibitions; his paintings are to be seen in the private collections of people all over the country; he has been praised by critics and connoisseurs for the unique position he holds among the rising generation of painters; and now through his album he is sure to be known and appreciated by a wider circle of friends and admirers. Short statured, vital and smart looking, Iswar Dass is a man of few words; gentle and unassuming, he makes a good friend and as an artist he is just IT.

BOMBAY
June 1949

MANU THACKER

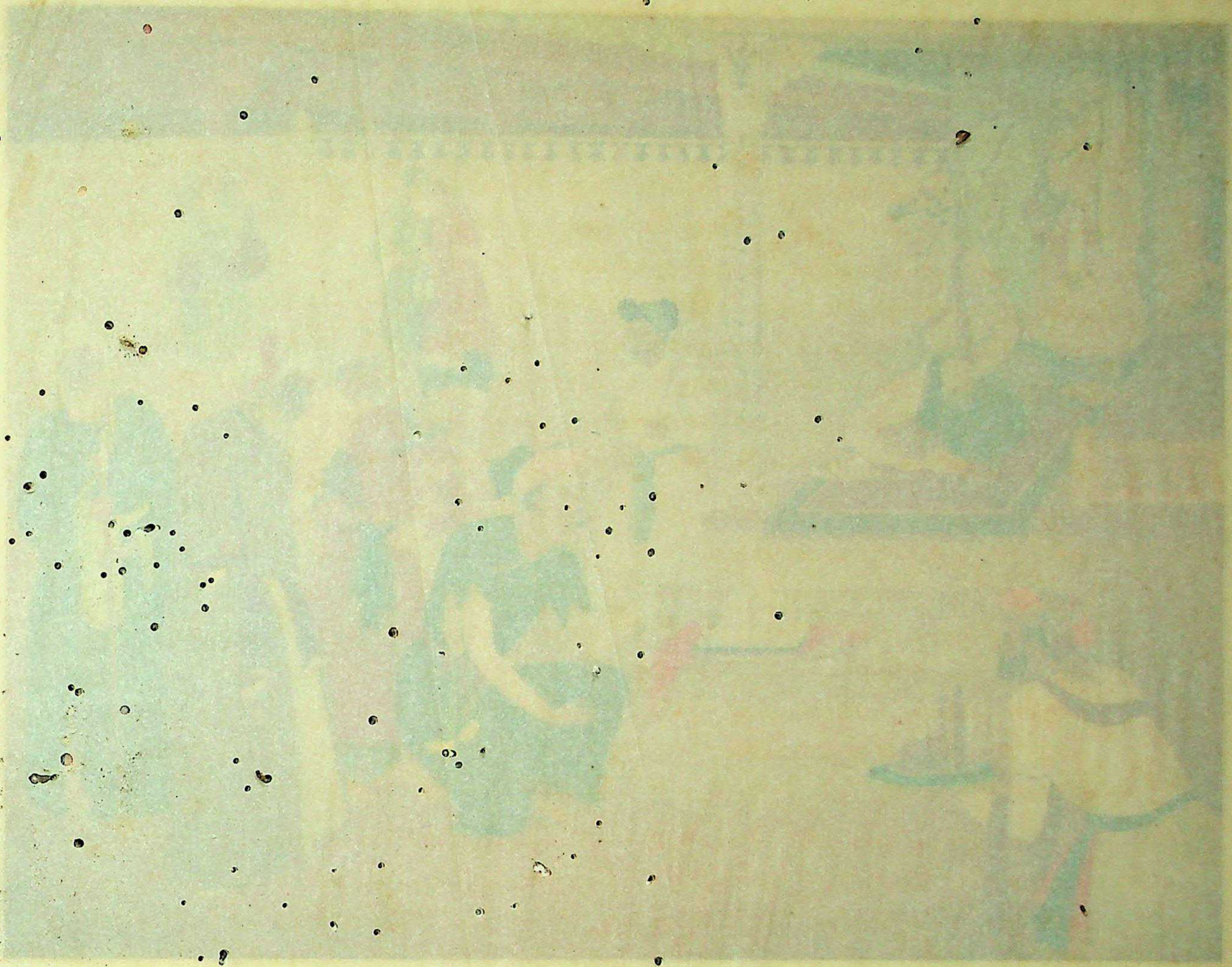


Plate I................" MODELS FOR THE TAJ "..................Size : 28″ × 22½″

In response to Emperor Shah Jehan's call, architects flocked with their models for a mausoleum from the ends of the world. The choice fell on the exquisite design of the legendary blind Persian Modeller. The dream was realised in the noble monument of the Taj.

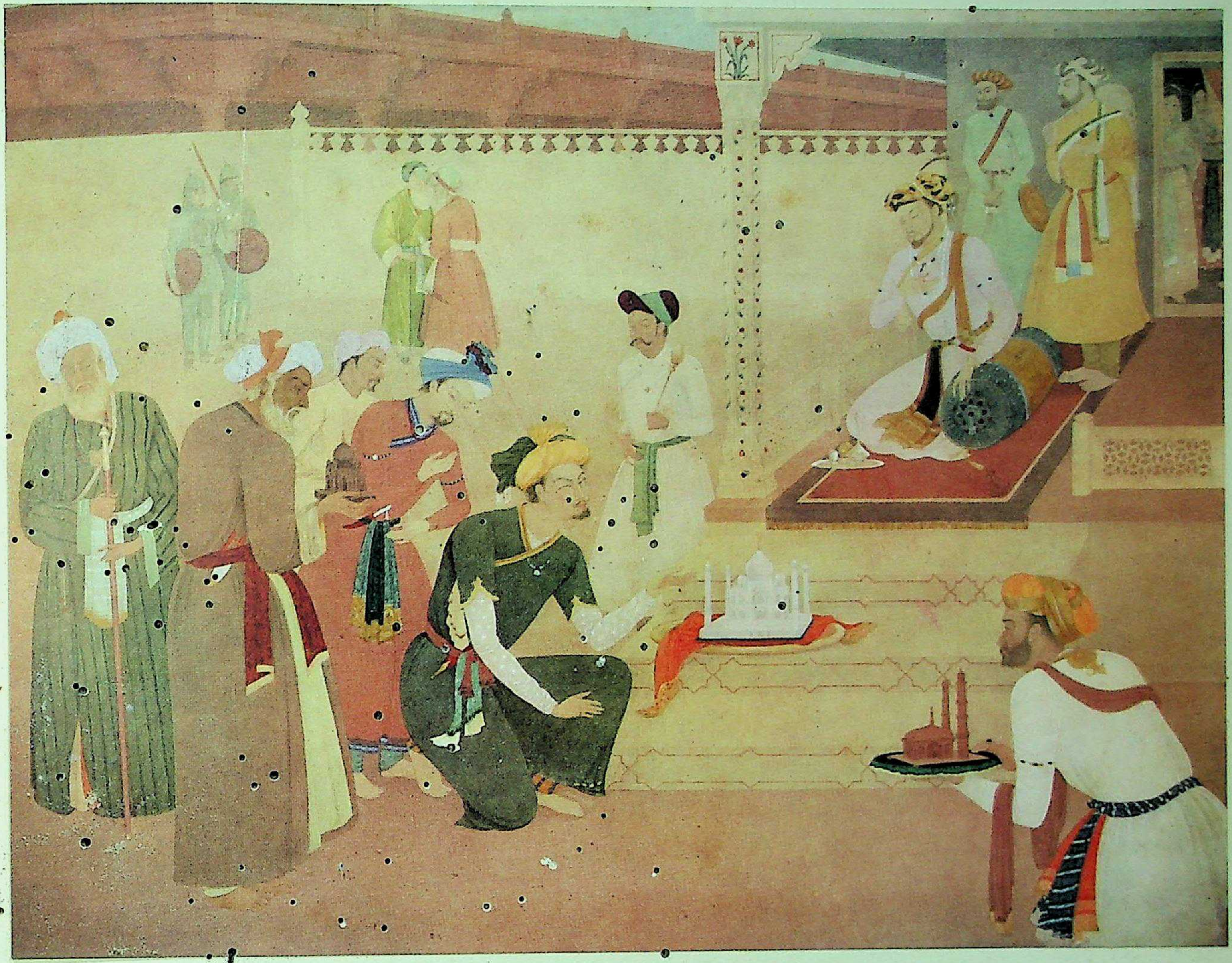


Plate II................" THE NIGHT "..............................Size : $10\frac{3}{8}$" × $11\frac{3}{4}$"

The symbolic lady scattering her nocturnal charms around. The effulgent crescent and the multitude of shooting stars fail to penetrate her dark depths.

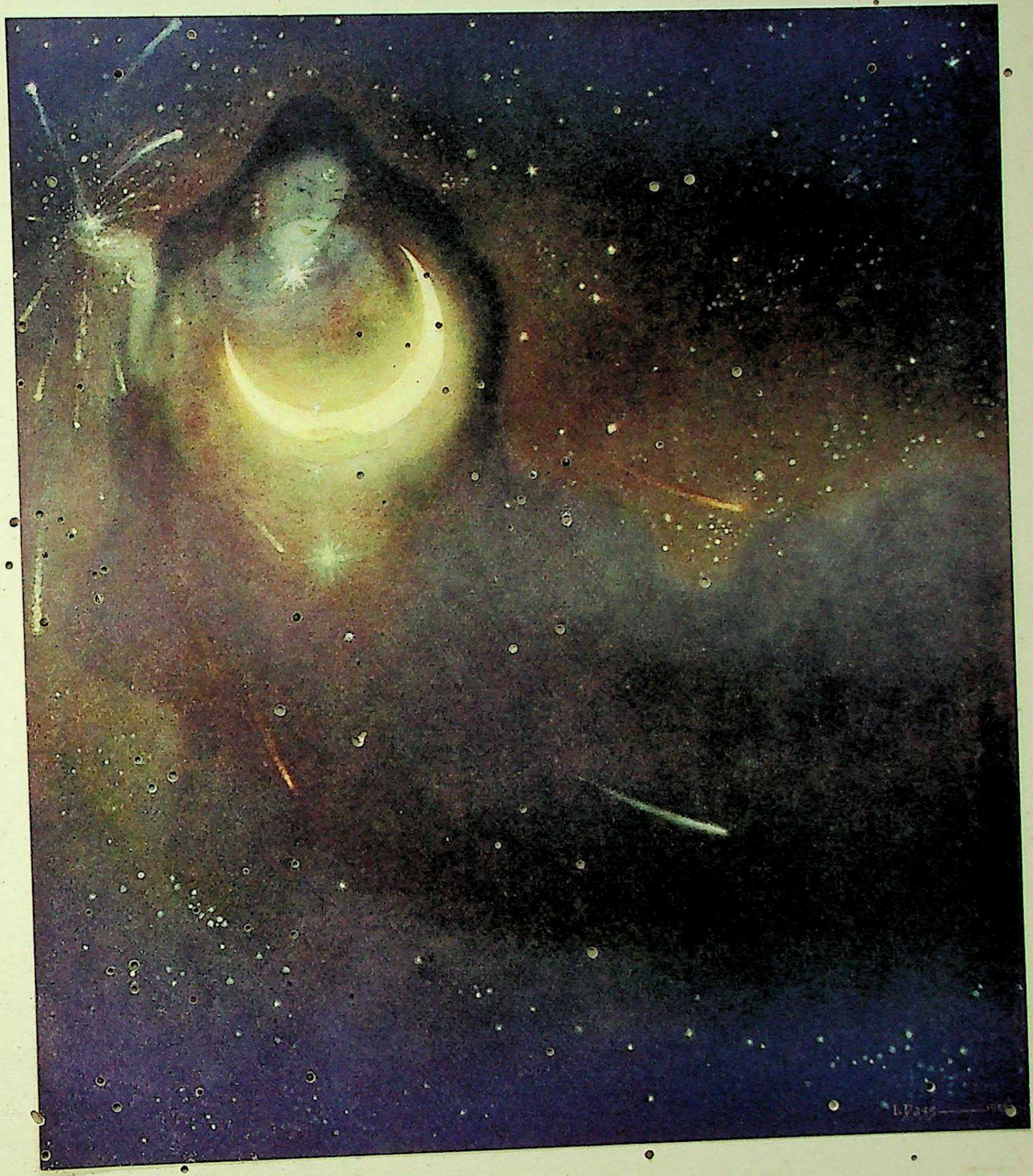


Plate III..............“THE FLAME”..............................Size : 7″×7½″

Gloom hangs over bridal fullness. Tragic life recoils from symbolic augury. The smoky trail gets the better of the feeble flame and casts its shadow over the arrested dubious bloom.

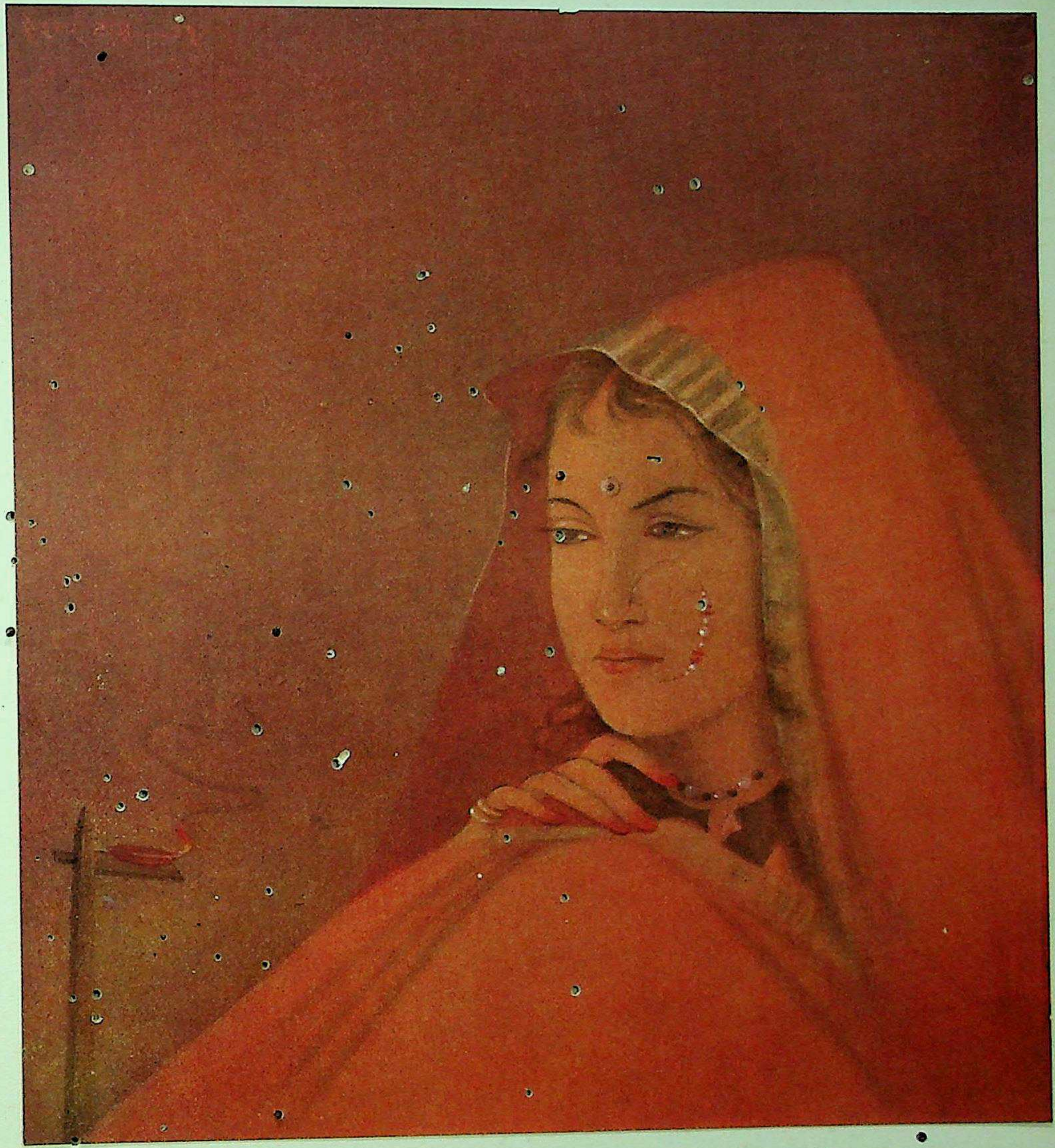


Plate IV……………“ MUSICAL SYMPHONY.”…………………Size : 9¾″ × 10⅞″

The musician strikes his chords. The resonance of the golden strings fills the air, but the buzzing of the bee yonder is more sustained and persistent. The fingers speed on as do the wings. Man reflects and is struck by a dull stupor. But the buzz thickens. The eager eyes of the player are fixed on the swimming wings.

Plate V…………… "RAGINI BHAIRVIN" ……………………Size : 8¾" × 11¾"

On the crystalline summit of Mount Kailásh, the Ragini offers her lotus to Lord Chandrasekhara. Attuned cymbals part in the hands for a while as the lady is cast into reverie. Among the towering tops the head of the God Shiva stands in quiet acceptance.

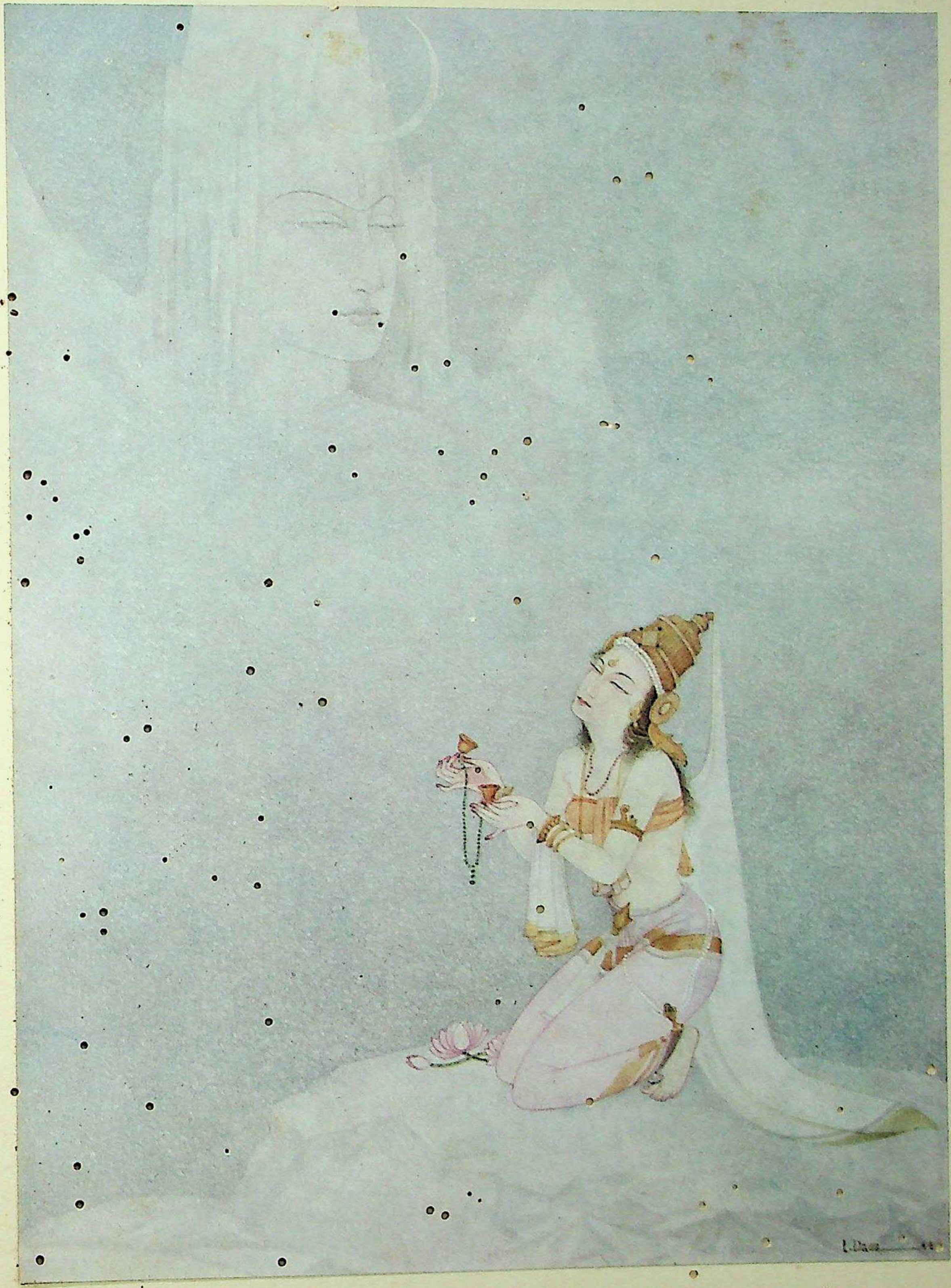


Plate VI……………"RAGINI MALVI"……………………………Size : 7¾″×12″

Young and supremely graceful, the Ragini paces a rhythmic banga (curve). Picturesque streams of scarfs bedeck the drapery as do the strings of pearls her supple form.

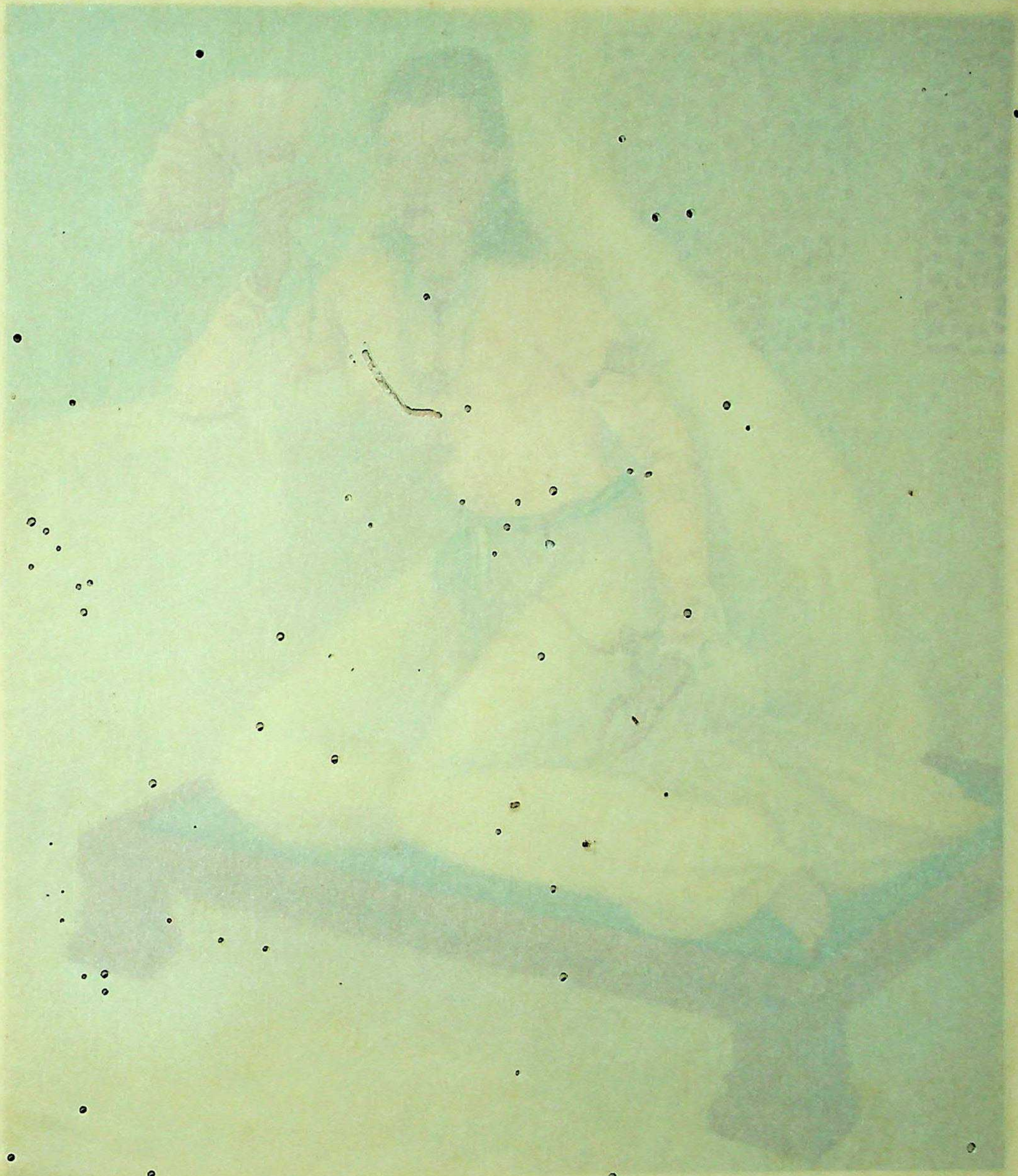


Plate VII.............. " He Cometh Not " ....Size : 7¾" × 9"

Endurance has raptures but hope, awaken the senses to awareness. The laden lids betray the dull agony within.

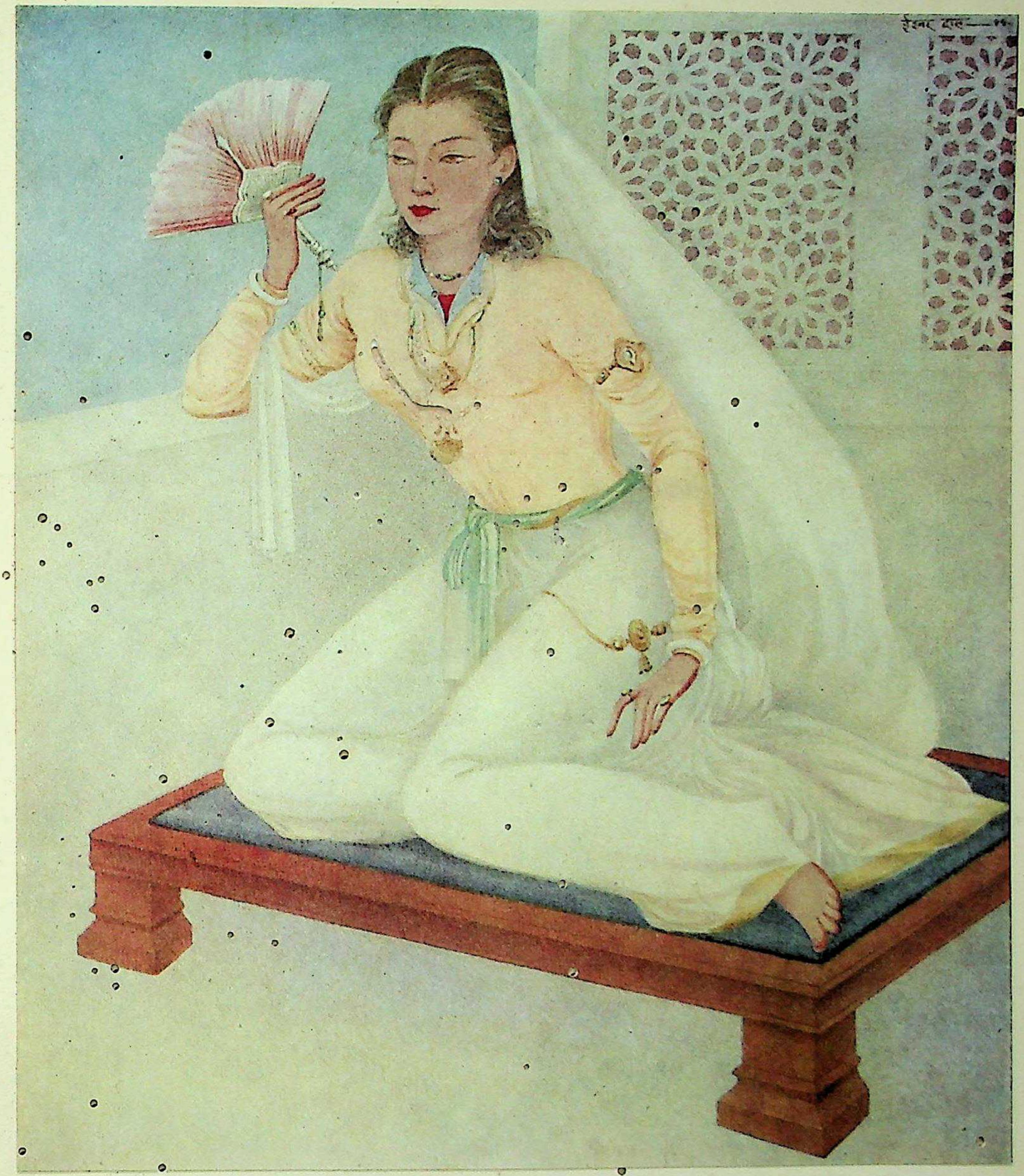


Plate VIII............"TOILET"....................................Size : 18″ × 22½″

Youth bursts forth disdaining all bounds in this maid-through-her-toilet.

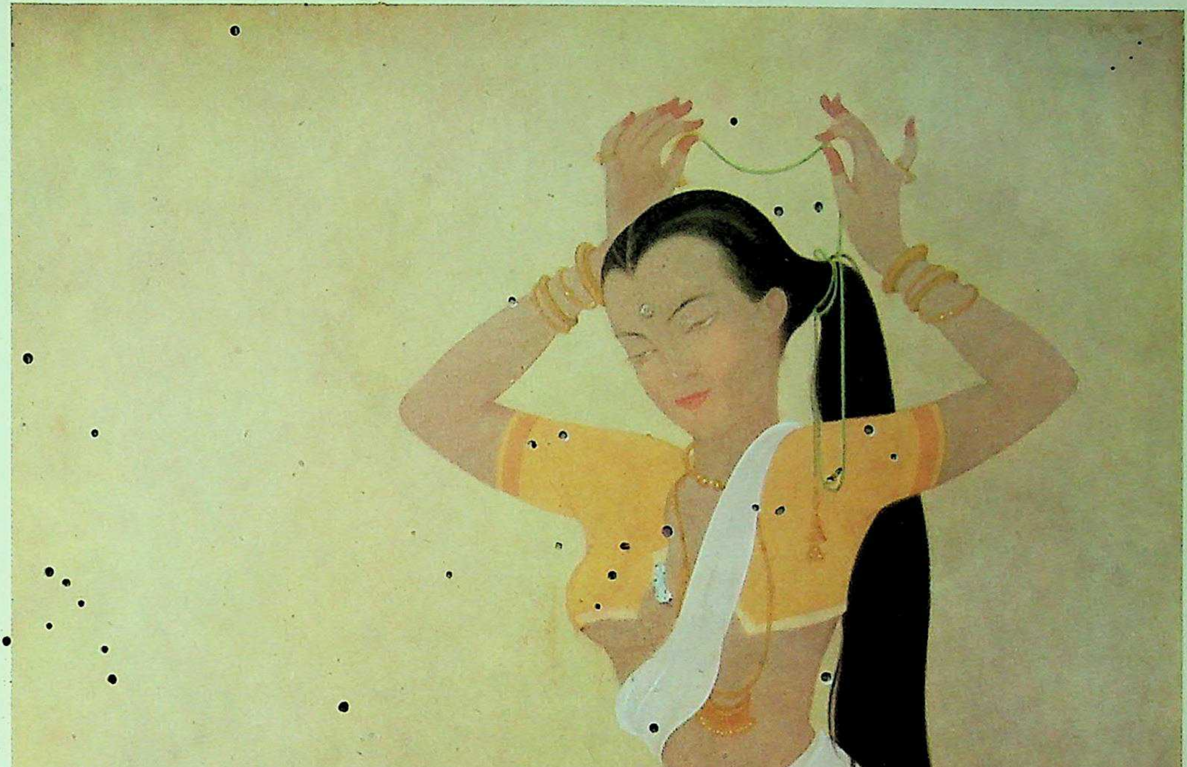


Plate IX..............“ EVENING CALL ”............................Size : 18½″ × 23″.

The day's begging has filled the bowl with dismay. The return to the dull shadows of the minarets is disappointing. The call of the Muezzin rends the air, sounding odd in the distant twilight. The day has failed—will the night fail too?

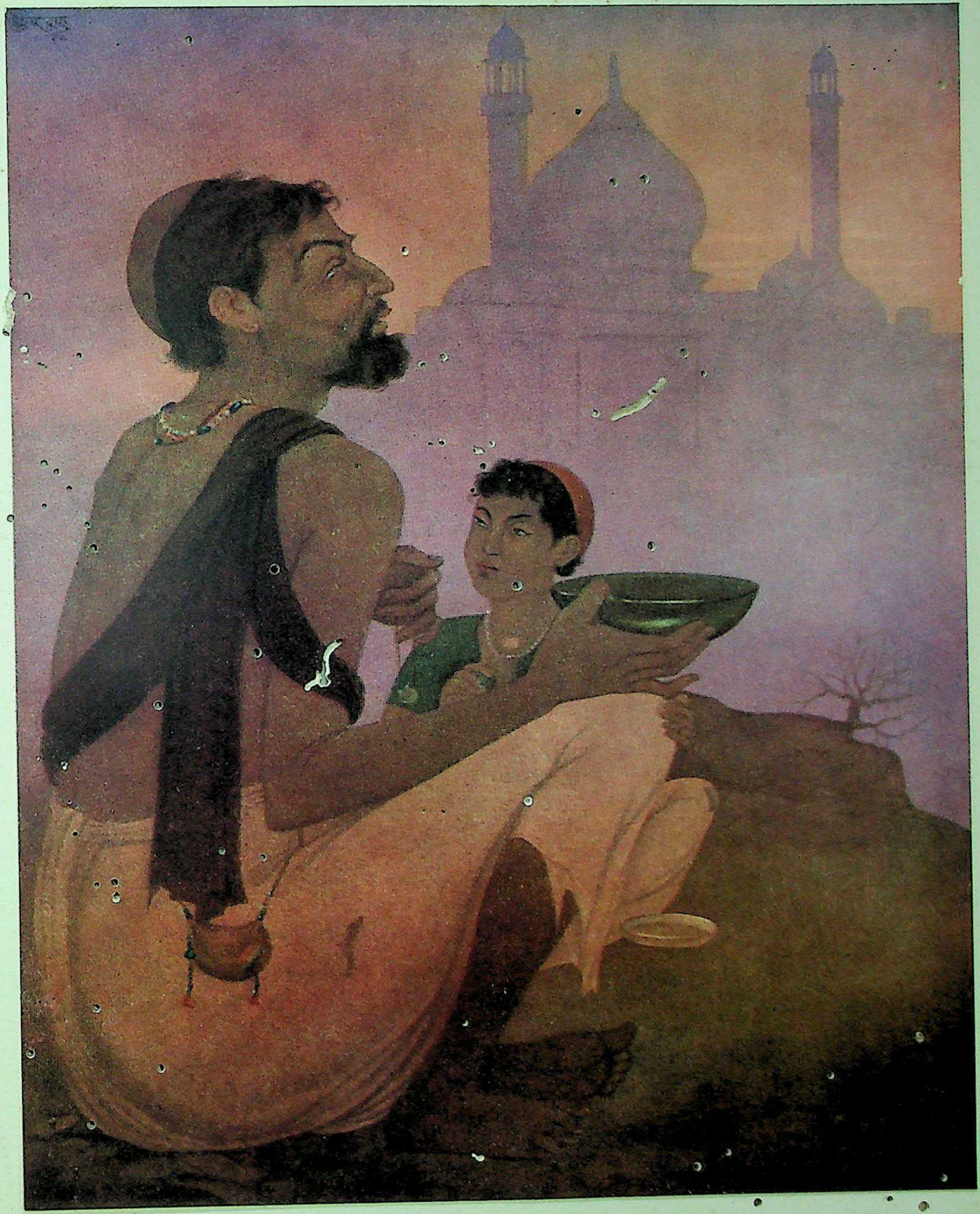


Plate X……………"Bloom"…………………......Size : 8¼″ × 8⅜″

Feminine youth is as riotous as nature around—the flower-l and the amorous pigeons, the dull colour that shades the scene dims e tones.

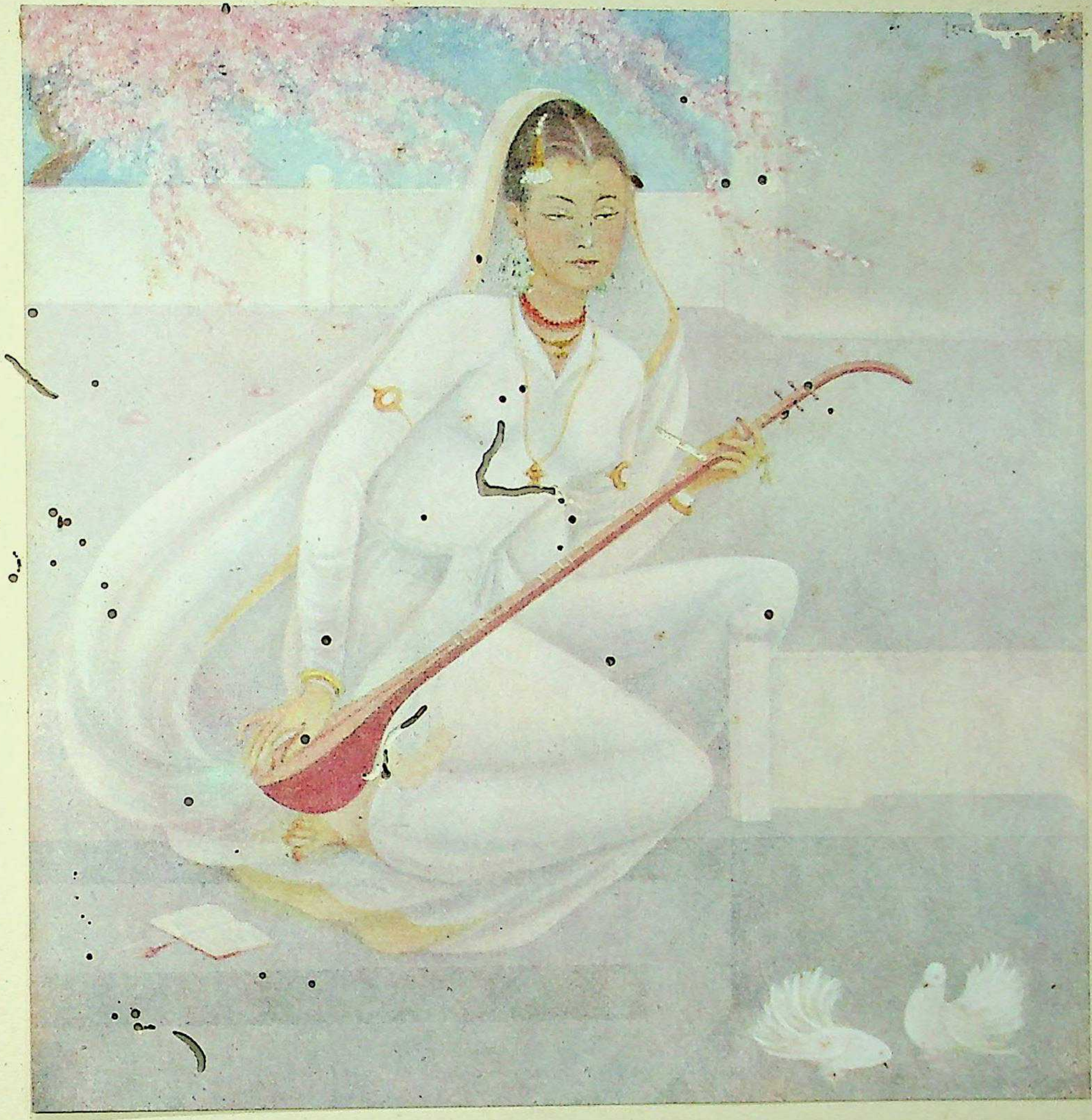
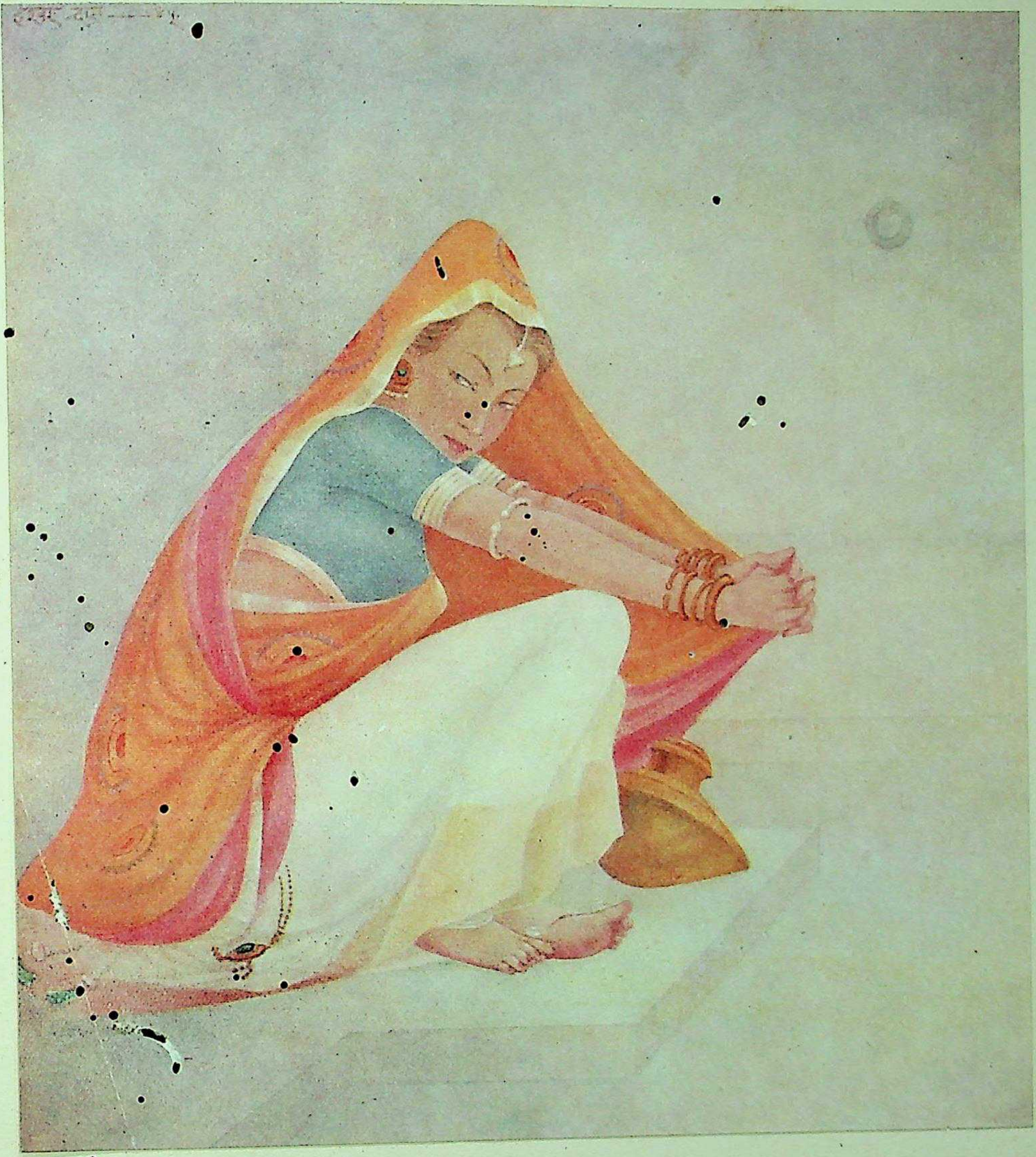
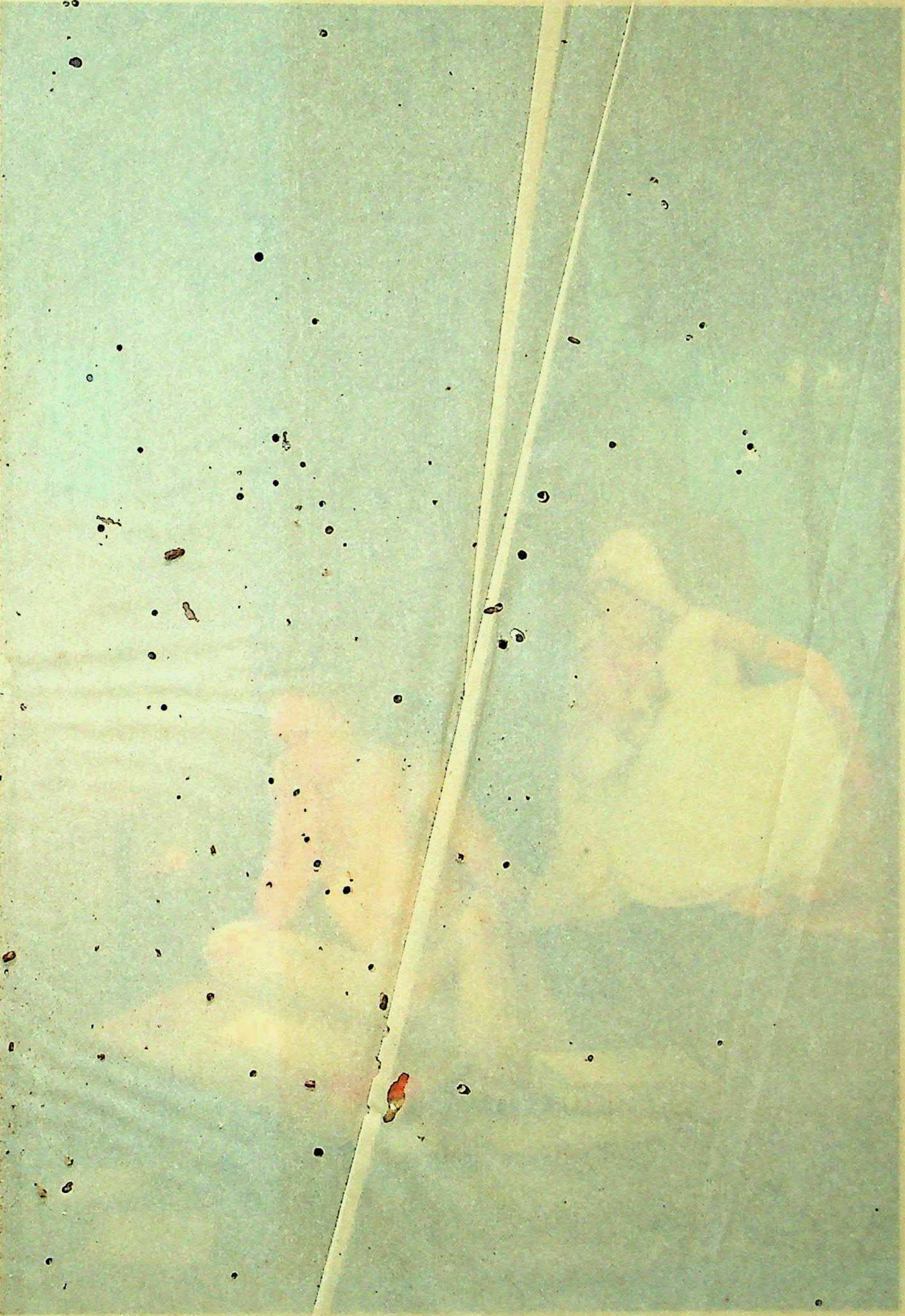


Plate XI……………“ KEEPING THE TRYST ”…………………Size : 7⅜″ × 8″

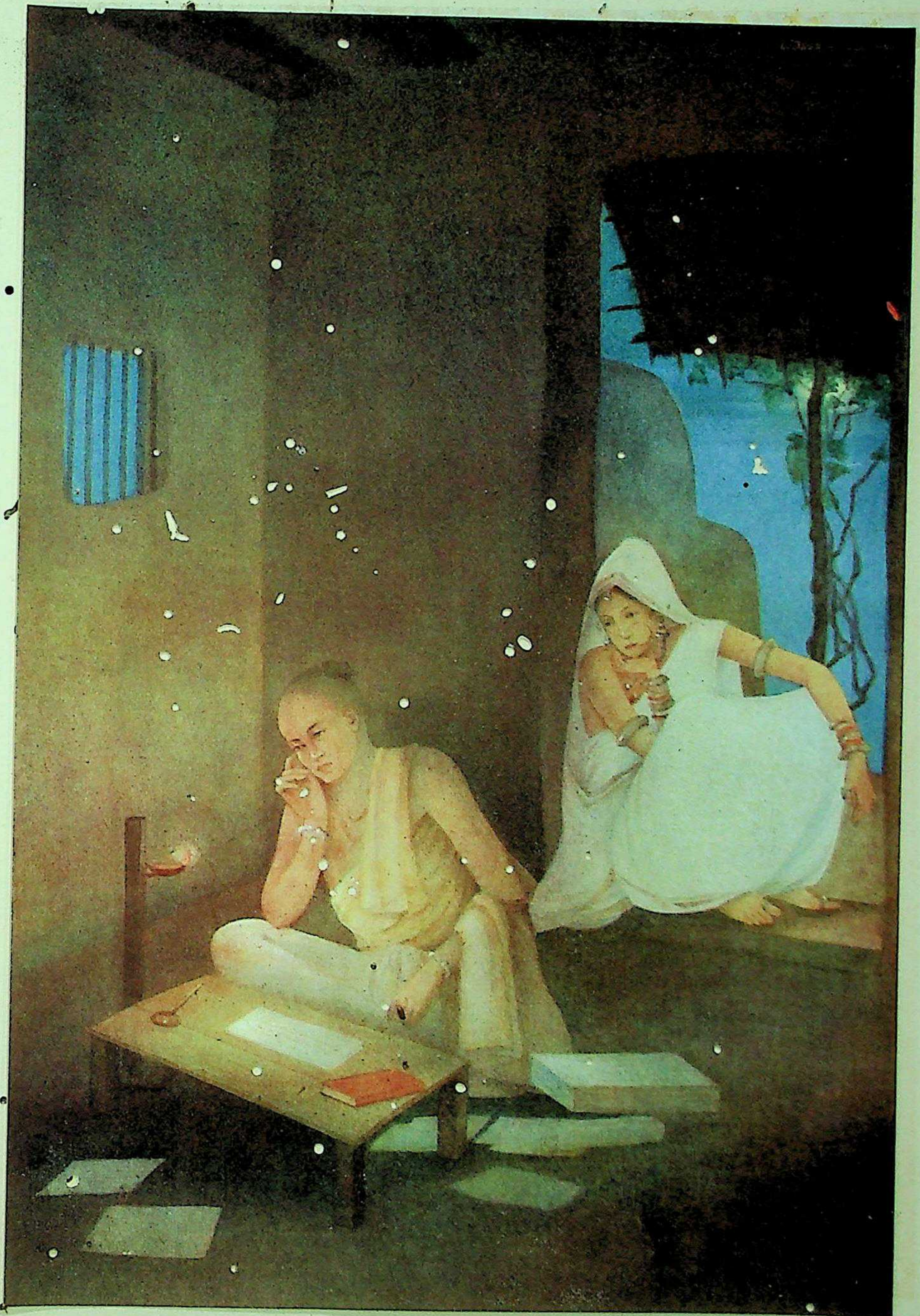
In sharp contrast to ‘ He Cometh Not ’—Plate II. She casts a satisfied look. Her tryst proves fruitful as her adorer swims in distant sight. Her waiting at the ghat has not gone unrewarded.





Pla XII............ " THE DISUNITED CORDS "..................Size : 10½" × 15"

Under the sp of peaceful night two hearts, tied together by wedlock, beat fast, their minds in a tumult, but to opposite es. At the door sits the wife, youthful and passionate, willing to be enveloped by the love of her husband, an looking at him with wistful longing. But the poet, oblivious of everything around him, is immersed in poetic thoughts and struggles to give expression to them.



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